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ABSTRACT

The genogram can be used in an initial interview, as an organizing conceptual approach to the study of a family system. As a family tree, the genogram is a portrait of a family system over time and space. It's a structural diagram of a family's three-generational relationship system--an overview of emotional problems within the context of the family system. Multigenerational family survey highlights the important issues and relationship patterns as they emerge and repeat over the generations, and defines the problem within the larger context of the emotional system. Major concepts of Bowen's family systems theory and psychotherapy serve to clarify how the genogram can contribute to the organization of facts and characteristics of a family, while dissecting the emotional process in a way that focuses on the problem areas in a family and, thus, can define from the onset where to place the treatment strategies. (Author/PK)

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THE GENOGRAM:

A MULTIGENERATIONAL FAMILY PORTRAIT

Symposium on
Reflections of Families:
Time Exposure Techniques
in Family Therapy

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Presented at the
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The utilization of the genogram as an organizing conceptual approach to the study of a family system in an initial interview will be the focus of this presentation. The genogram, a family tree, is a portrait of a family system over time and space which describes the important information about a family system. It is a structural diagram of a family's three-generational relationship system; an overview of emotional problems within the context of the family system. Major concepts of Bowen's family systems theory and psychotherapy will be introduced to clarify how the genogram can contribute to the organization of facts and characteristics of a family, while dissecting the emotional process in a way that focuses on the problem areas in a family and, thus, defines from the onset where to place the treatment stratagies.

The theoretical concepts of family systems theory will be presented both as background and as a conceptual tool to provide a way of thinking in system terms, to think in terms of relationship processes, rather than individual dynamics or diagnostic categories (Entin, 1973).

Family systems theory is a way of thinking about and dealing with emotional problems in families. More than simply a new technique or additional treatment modality, family systems theory provides a different view of man and emotional disorders, and a different concept of change. Emotional disorders are conceived of as a dysfunction in the family emotional system and treatment is directed toward modification of the relationship between the most important members of the family, usually the spouse or parents. Family therapy has brought with it a shift from the individual, intrapsychic model to a recognition that if an individual is to change, the context in which he lives, the family, must also change (Haley, 1969) and that if one individual in the family is symptomatic, all the members of the family are involved in the problem (Bowen, 1971). No longer is a problem viewed as within self. Others must be involved. It is a family problem.

The family is a system, composed of a number of different systems and subsystems, all interdependent and interconnected with each other. A

change in one part of the system automatically results in a compensatory change in other parts of the system (Bowen, 1966); the components of the system are rearranged and the people interact and relate differently.

The goal of family therapy is to change the patterns of relating, the way the individual members interact and communicate, thereby improving the functioning as a family in promoting the growth and differentiation of all the members of the family.

The concept of the "triangle" is central to the theoretical system. The "triangle," a three person system, is the "molecule," or building block, of any emotional system, whether it is in a family or social system (Bowen, 1971). One of the characteristics of a triangle is that it "is the smallest stable relationship system. A two person system is an unstable system which immediately forms a series of interlocking triangles " (Bowen, 1971). Since the triangle has definite relationship patterns that predictably repeat in periods of calm and stress, triangle theory is an attempt to conceptualize how three family members, or two family members as an issue, for example, drinking, which takes on the emotional significance of a third person, relate to each other in an orderly series of alliances and rejections within the family (Fogarty, 1971).

The family is composed of interlocking triangles: the primary triangle is that of the nuclear family consisting of father and mother and children; the extended family, comprised of husband and his family of origin, another triangle; the wife and her family of origin, another triangle; and the relationship of each spouse to their in-laws, another familiar triangle. In a family, the tension between parents can be transmitted to the children and will become manifest as symptons. This is predictable in all systems. While conventional theory dictates to treat the "sick individual," family systems theory postulates that if you "modify the basic triangle" you will achieve change in all relationships and thus directs its efforts at working with the two head people in the system.

One of the most unique and innovative aspects of Bowen's theoretical framework is the concept of "the scale of differentiation." The "Scale" is important because it attempts to conceptualize all human functioning on a single continuum and get away from the concept of "normal" in describing how people are not alike, how they are different. Characteristics of individuals are based on their relative positions on the scale and it is a means of making predictions about them.

Individuals are characterized on the scale according to their orientation to life. Low scale people live in a feeling world and cannot distinguish feeling from fact. They manifest the greatest amount of emotional fusion or emotional undifferentiation.

With increasingly higher positions on the scale, the two systems begin to become more autonomous and there is a growing awareness of separately defined "feeling" and "intellectual" systems. When the two systems are separate, both systems are free; the thinking system is not reactive to emotional relationships and people can be free to have a close relationship or not.

The concept of "level of differentiation" is useful in understanding peoples' approach to life, goals, and relationships. People tend to remain at the same basic level of differentiation as when they left their family of origin. People choose friends, life styles, and marital partners at their same level of differentiation. Therefore, you cannot call your spouse immature without it reflecting back on you.

An individual's level of differentiation depends upon the extent to which they become involved in the family emotional process. The term "undifferentiated family ego mass" refers to the amount of fusion in the nuclear family (Bowen, 1971). The greater the amount of undifferentiation, or togetherness, the greater the potential problems. The mechanisms used by the parents in coping with the intensity of emotional fusion, based on their patterns of relationships with their family of origin, will help

determine the pattern and intensity of nuclear family problems. The three main patterns are: (1) Marital conflict; (2) Dysfunction in a spouse through physical or emotional illness or social dysfunctioning, such as drinking, acting out or other irresponsible behavior; (3) Projection of the family problem to the children. The parental "we-ness" projects the undifferentiation to one or more children with the result of physical or emotional symptoms, learning problems, or acting out behavior. This concept of the multigenerational transmission process explains how problems move from one generation to the next as parents transmit varying levels of undifferentiation, or immaturity, to their children over multiple generations. This concept provides a way of predicting from past generations the general life course of future generations, all else being equal.

The last major concept is that of sibling position, best described by Toman (1969), which defines personality profiles, expectations and orientations to life based on one's position in the family.

With this very brief theoretical background, I would like to discuss how this conceptual base is utilized in an initial session to evaluate a family, organize the data collected and plan treatment. Obviously, what transpires in the initial session depends on many factors: the theoretical base of the therapist, state of anxiety in a family, and the family members present. Typically, I attempt to define the problem and process in such a manner as for the parental generation, or couple, to come in, without their children, and work to maintain that focus during the course of therapy. The first session should provide a balance between hearing a family out in a crisis and obtaining information. Agitated family may need to talk about their view of the crisis, which will cool things down. In other families, it may be more possible to start with structured information gathering.

To start with, let me state my goals in the first session:

(1) reasonably clear definition of the membership and boundaries of the system;

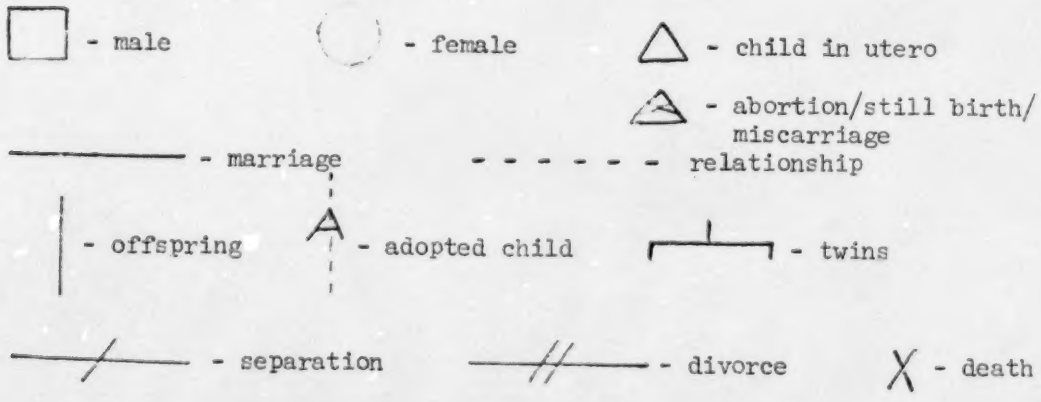
(2) a beginning definition of the emotional process surrounding the presenting symptoms;

(3) be relevant to the family and their view of the problem (listen and accept their definition of whom to include in the initial session);

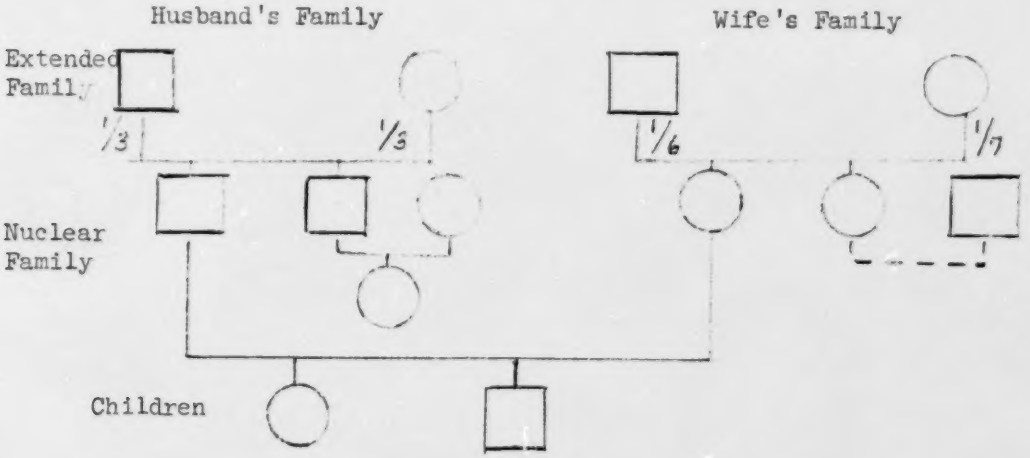
(4) assist the engagement process by giving the family some feedback before the end of the session.

In an effort to accomplish all these goals and provide a defined structure and method for gathering information within the context of Bowen's family systems theory, I virtually think and see relationships in a family in terms of the structure of a genogram; I see the relationships visually, almost like a Calder mobile hanging in space. It is an overview of the family relationship process that provides a time/space multigenerational family portrait -- the who/what/where of its members. While obtaining the "subjective" perception of the family members, questions to obtain "objective" facts can also be intertwined. Thus, as family members define their view of the "problem", the theoretical concepts of family systems thinking organize my thinking -- triangles, interlocking triangles, repeating mirror image problems across generations, the family projection process -- and help keep me focused on the overall pattern and ask questions to obtain a two or three generational overview of the pattern.

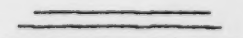
The following symbols illustrate the relationships and sibling positions for each family member in the system.



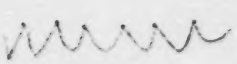
A typical genogram follows. Note that the husband's family is on the left, wife's on the right and that the children are listed chronologically, with the oldest on the left and the youngest on the right. Names, dates - birth marriage death - place of residence as well as a full listing of the extended family, or sibs on the grandparental generation level, have been omitted in the diagram for the sake of clarity of presentation.



The picture comes to life when the intensity of the relationship system is included in the diagram which serves to highlight the family's characteristics and way of relating.



overly close relationship



conflictual relationship

cut-off, emotional or physical

In an "average" family, the basic information for a family can be obtained in five to ten minutes. This will provide information along a number of dimensions by clarifying physical and emotional boundaries, characteristic of membership, normative and nodal events -- important life cirles of additions and subtractions to the family system through birth, death, divorce, moves -- events that shape the future structure and form of the relationship system, toxid issues and emotional cut-offs, general openness - closedness of the system, whether tending toward cohesive or explosive, and the availability of relationship options within the family (Guerin & Pendagast, 1976).

Next, the question is -- how do you think in terms of relationship systems, use the structure of a genogram, and go about the main business of the initial session -- finding out about "the problem", toning down anxiety, engaging the family members present, collect information and plan for the therapy?

I usually start with some questions as a base -- husband and wife - ages, dates of birth, marriage, birth of children -- but interweave them with obtaining their view of the problem. By starting with the symptoms, you are relevant and, besides, this is what brought them in and what they want to talk about. So, I attempt to get a fix on the nuclear family -- parents and their children. The development of symptoms can often be timed to other important events in the nuclear and extended family. Next, is a brief chronological view of the developing family as it met both internal and external stress and change over time -- so, I investigate the parental relationship through the course of the marriage, how each spouse adapted to changes over time. Functioning can be estimated with a few questions about stress areas and the patterns of relationships outlined at the beginning -- marital conflict, distance, dysfunction in a spouse, e.g., physical, emotional or social illnesses, projection of the problem to a child, additions/losses, moves, distance/closeness, job and job changes and frequency/intensity/quality of contact between family members. Exact dates are important because they are often related to internal and

external events. This survey provides a picture of the general functioning levels of each spouse in the nuclear family, the involvement of the children in the projection process, the parents' responsiveness to stress and evidence of the flexibility or rigidity of the entire system.

Next -- a survey of the two extended family systems, in either order. Clues for where to start may emerge from what each spouse says as to highly charged issues in the nuclear family as being similar to toxic issues/patterns in the extended family The survey is similar to the nuclear family survey except it focuses more on overall patterns -- the marital relationship of the extended family members, exact ages and dates of birth and marriage, occupation and health provide key clues to their functioning. Information on siblings -- birth order, occupation education, place of residence, a few ideas on each spouse and the children and their overall life course, and the frequency and nature of contact with family members - is also important

All this, obtained in a relatively brief spaon of time in an initial interview, to be expanded upon and enlarged in more detail in subsequent sessions, provides the basis for formulating a fairly accurate working model of the family emotional process and how each nuclear parent functioned in the system and a beginning definition of the emotional process surrounding the presenting symptoms. A life style developed in the family of origin will generally operate in the nuclear family and also in family therapy. While it takes two to make a marriage, it takes two or three generations for symptoms and patterns to emerge. The multigenerational family survey highlights the important issues and relationship patterns as they emerge and repeat over the generations and defines the problem within the larger context of the emotional system. And, thus, most importantly, it allows for the families beginning intellectual awareness of related events and when they are able to "hear" what it is "saying" to them, it provides them the opportunity to change their part in the system -- thereby giving new form and shape to the multigenerational family portrait.

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